



# How to Choose a Masterpiece

The Clark Art Institute receives one of its largest gifts—331 works of art from the foundation of Aso O. Tavitian. Time soon to build a new wing to house the treasures.

By Patti Zielinski

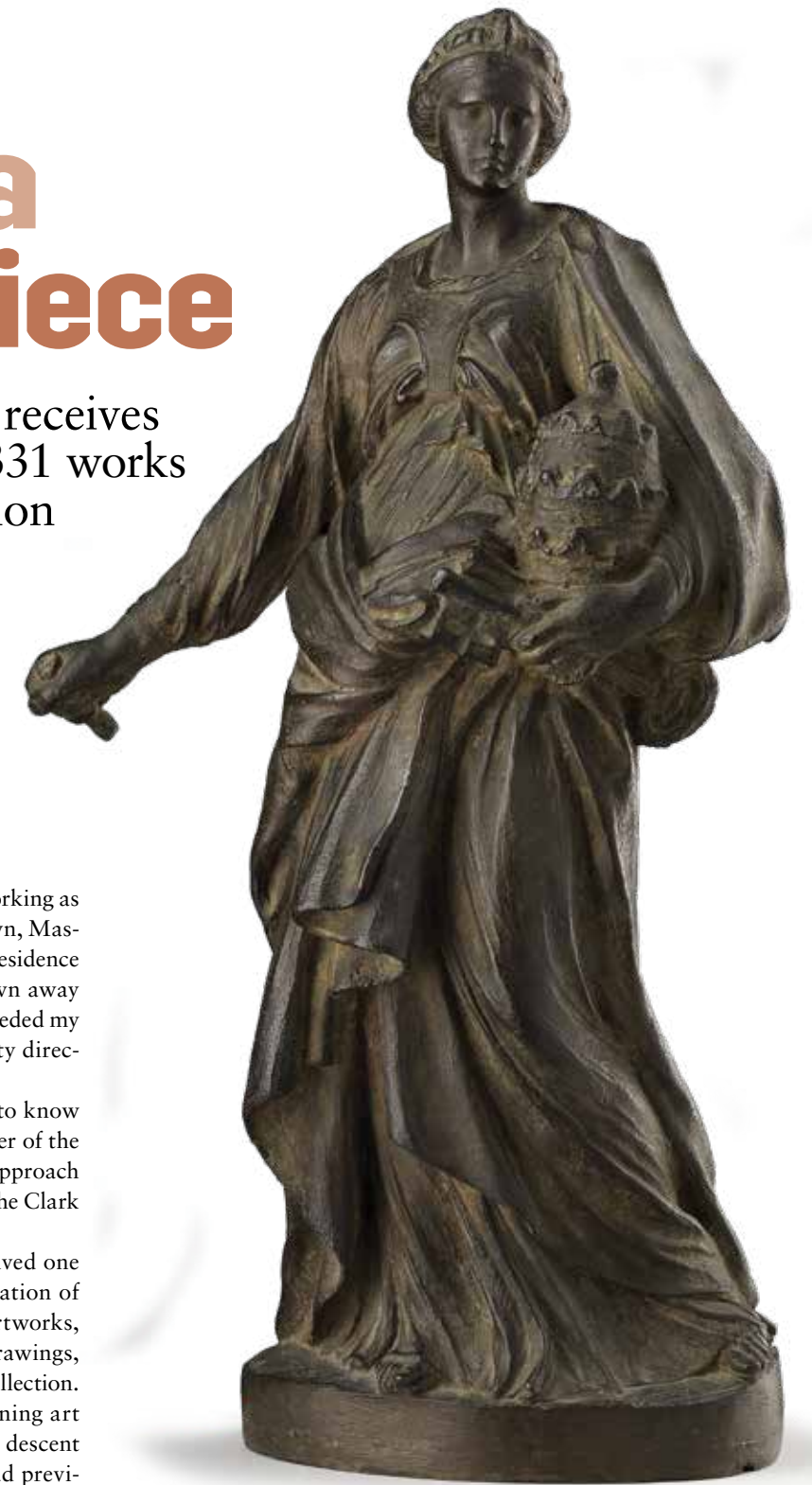
**Shortly after Esther Bell** began working as a curator at the Clark Art Institute in Williamstown, Massachusetts, she was invited to Aso O. Tavitian's residence for lunch. "When I entered his home, I was blown away by the museum quality of his collection; it far exceeded my expectations," says Bell, now the museum's deputy director and chief curator.

Over the years, Bell had the honor of getting to know Tavitian—long a friend of the Clark and a member of the Board of Trustees from 2006 to 2012—and his approach to collecting. Little did she know how vital a role the Clark would play in the preservation of his legacy.

In October, the Clark announced it had received one of the largest gifts in its history from the foundation of the late philanthropist, who died in 2020: 331 artworks, consisting of 132 paintings, 130 sculptures, 39 drawings, and 30 decorative arts objects from his personal collection.

Recognized as one of the world's most discerning art connoisseurs, Tavitian, a Bulgarian of Armenian descent who immigrated to the United States in 1961, had previously shown some of his collection at the Clark, notably in 2011 when he loaned 30 paintings and one sculpture for the exhibition "Eye to Eye: European Portraits, 1450–1850."

The gift also included more than \$45 million to endow



Opposite: Antoine-Jean Gros, *Portrait of Count Honoré de La Ribouisière*, 1815. Oil on canvas. Above: Gian Lorenzo Bernini, *Countess Matilda of Canossa*, c.1630–39. Bronze.

CLARK ART INSTITUTE, WILLIAMSTOWN, MASSACHUSETTS. GIFT OF ASO O. TAVITIAN FOUNDATION.





a new curatorial position, care for the collection, and build a new Aso O. Tavitian Wing, where the entirety of the gift will be on view during an introductory period after the wing opens between 2027 and 2028. This will be a rare opportunity to view Tavitian's works on paper, which will afterward be stored for study and presented in periodic displays. The majority of paintings, sculpture and decorative arts objects will be continually shown in the Tavitian Wing and in the Clark's permanent collection galleries. (The Tavitian Foundation will sell the remainder of the collection of more than 900 works next year at Sotheby's.)

Prior to his death, Tavitian discussed his intentions to donate a significant portion of his collection to the Clark. "He wanted the artworks coming to the Clark to be representative of the spirit of the collection but was also conscious that we wanted something that was fitting for the public," says museum director Olivier Meslay.

The gift will complement the Clark's holdings of art before 1850 and strengthen the current collection. Sculpture particularly is a great strength of the collection, with works in bronze, plaster, terracotta, marble, and other materials dating from the Renaissance through the late 19th century by artists who include Gian Lorenzo Bernini, Andrea della Robbia, Gil de Siloé, Clodion (Claude Michel), and Jean-Baptiste Carpeaux. The addition of the 130 sculptures gives a significant boost to the Clark's permanent holdings. "It radically transforms the sculpture collection and will be the most visible impact to visitors," Meslay says.



Della Robbia's glazed terracotta *Portrait of a Youth* (c. 1470–80) is one such exceptional work modeled in deep relief with the head and neck set off against a simple roundel glazed in blue, resulting in a sculpture that is remarkably lifelike and modern.

Tavitian's collecting focus showed a keen interest in paintings and sculpture from the Renaissance through the early 19th century. The gift is rich in portraiture, including important works by Parmigianino (*Portrait of a Man*, c. 1530, oil on canvas), Elizabeth Vigée Lebrun (*Self-Portrait in Studio Costume*, c. 1800, oil on panel), Jean-Honoré Fragonard (*The Letter*, 1773–76, oil on canvas), and Jacques-Louis David. Meslay says the museum complemented its one portrait by David (*Comte Henri-Amédée-Mercure de Turenne-d'Aynac*) with three more from Tavitian's collection. "He's an important artist and this was a way to enrich our collection at the highest level of quality," he says. David painted *Portrait of Dominique-Vincent Ramel de Nogaret* (1820, oil on canvas), the former finance minister of France, while both men were in exile in Brussels following the final abdication of Napoleon in 1815. The two other David artworks in the gift are a pendant portrait of Ramel de Nogaret's wife, Ange-Pauline-Charlotte Ramel de Nogaret, and the portrait of the artist's son, Jules.

The portraiture collection reflects Tavitian's deep interest in the human experience, the historical stories associated with each

Above, left to right: Angelica Kauffmann, *Portrait of Elizabeth Kerr (née Fortescue), Marchioness of Lothian*, c.1770. Oil on canvas.; Peter Paul Rubens, *Portrait of a Young Man*, c.1613–15. Oil on panel.



Wallerant Vaillant, *Self Portrait in a Turban*, 1650–1675. Oil on canvas.

LEFT: CLARK ART INSTITUTE, WILLIAMSTOWN, MASSACHUSETTS. GIFT OF ASO O. TAVITIAN FOUNDATION. PHOTOGRAPH © BRUCE M. WHITE, 2024. RIGHT: CLARK ART INSTITUTE, WILLIAMSTOWN, MASSACHUSETTS. GIFT OF ASO O. TAVITIAN FOUNDATION.

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Clockwise from above: Jean-Honoré Fragonard, *The Letter*, c.1773–76. Oil on canvas.; Jan van Eyck and workshop, *Madonna of the Fountain*, c.1440. Oil on panel.; Antoine-François Gérard, *Game of Hoops*, c.1780–89. Wax.

person portrayed and in past cultures. This is notably exemplified by Peter Paul Rubens's *Portrait of a Young Man* (c. 1613–1615, oil on panel), which depicts the artist's ability to capture the subtleties of character in an unknown sitter.

The donation gives the Clark its first works by more than 100 artists, including the 16th-century Italian painter Jacopo da Pontormo (*Portrait of a Boy*, c. 1535–40, oil on fired tile), and Gian Lorenzo Bernini, who is considered to be one of the greatest Italian sculptors of the 17th century; the small-scale



bronze *Countess Matilda of Canossa* is a reduction of the over life-size marble Bernini made for the tomb of Countess Matilda in St. Peter's Basilica in Rome. The Tavitian gift also includes a rare painting by Bernini, thought to be of his brother, Domenico Bernini. "Having a sculpture by Bernini alongside a painting by him is just so special.," Bell notes.

The oldest artwork selected is *Madonna of the Fountain* (c. 1440), a rare oil-on-panel, which is one of several period versions of one of Jan Van Eyck's last paintings, "a masterpiece of humanism," says Bell.

Clark leadership selected artworks based on criteria including quality (though "quality was almost everywhere in the collection and at the highest level," Meslay notes), works by artists the museum desired, and pieces that could strengthen the current collection.

"There was an incredible thirst for

TOP IMAGES: CLARK ART INSTITUTE, WILLIAMSTOWN, MASSACHUSETTS, GIFT OF ASO O. TAVITIAN FOUNDATION. BELOW: CLARK ART INSTITUTE, WILLIAMSTOWN, MASSACHUSETTS, GIFT OF ASO O. TAVITIAN FOUNDATION. PHOTOGRAPH © BRUCE M. WHITE, 2024

TOP: CLARK ART INSTITUTE, WILLIAMSTOWN, MASSACHUSETTS, GIFT OF ASO O. TAVITIAN FOUNDATION. BELOW: CLARK ART INSTITUTE, WILLIAMSTOWN, MASSACHUSETTS, GIFT OF ASO O. TAVITIAN FOUNDATION. PHOTOGRAPH © BRUCE M. WHITE, 2024



Above, left to right: Jacopo da Pontormo, *Portrait of a Boy*, c.1535–40 or later. Oil on fired tile.; Gian Lorenzo Bernini, *Portrait of the Artist's Brother, Domenico Bernini* (?), c.1630–35. Oil on paper mounted on canvas. Below: Gil de Siloé, *Saint Cecilia*, c.1500. Marble.

more sculptures," he adds.

The curators found the scholarly due diligence to make the selections—reading about the collection and studying it in person—a happy task. "What distinguishes Aso from other collectors is that he was buying consistently at museum-quality level," Bell says. "He often competed against museums for certain acquisitions. This made proposing a dream list such a joy."

"His collection is masterpiece after masterpiece. He needed to have a personal relationship with each of the objects he was buying," Meslay adds.

When asked to name a favorite piece, Meslay ("If I pick one, it could be different tomorrow!") and Bell ("It would be like picking a favorite child!") are initially at a loss. However, Meslay notes being drawn to a rare, delicately carved marble sculpture depicting Saint Cecilia (c. 1500) playing an organ by Gil de Siloé, recognized as the greatest Spanish sculptor of the 15th century. "I don't know another work of art by him outside of Spain," says Meslay, who also



cites an admiration for the ensemble of eight Clodion sculptures in terracotta and marble that are "so modern, sensual and playful it is really unbelievable."

Bell is captivated by the "very beautiful portrait of a man with a turban and piercing gaze": Wallerant Vaillant's *Self Portrait in a Turban* (1650–75, oil on canvas). "When that painting appeared at The European Fine Art Fair, it was the talk of the fair. Then it was bought, and I could not wait to see where it landed—then I encountered it in Aso's home and thought, 'Wow.'"

The gift also includes an endowment for a newly created Aso O. Tavitian Curator of Early Modern European Painting and Sculpture, staffing to ensure continuous oversight of the works, the publication of a catalogue documenting the collection, as well as ongoing care and maintenance of the collection and the new facility.

"The fact that Aso, a person who had put so much care and effort into building this collection, left it to a museum devoted to making art available and accessible to the public is a sign of his wonderful, generous legacy," Bell says. 🏛️